STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE UNIVERSITY

Response to Request for Information
House Higher Education Committee
Interim Charge Four

September 1, 2020

Below is Stephen F. Austin State University's (SFA) response to the House Higher Education Committee's request for information related to Interim Charge Four:

Study the prevalence of online courses and degrees in higher education. Examine how institutions providing online courses and programs are accredited, particularly courses and programs originating from states other than Texas. Evaluate how students whose courses and degrees are primarily online perform in terms of persistence and degree completion versus students who take courses in traditional classroom settings. Study labor market outcomes for students with primarily online courses and degrees versus more traditional programs.

1. What are the existing barriers to online learning for students and faculty? What have institutions done to alleviate and eliminate these barriers?

    Barriers include funding, staffing, and other resources. SFA has placed a high priority on this area, including adding resources and staff during a time of significant budgetary reductions. A key barrier for all programs that are accredited involves proctoring of online courses. The costs increase as the numbers rise because of pivoting to remote delivery options, so appropriate budgeting is a challenge.

2. What information and data is available regarding long-term student success for those taking courses primarily online -- both in general and specific to Texas institutions?

    The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board is making great progress to expand data collection and utilization of those data to improve student success. Recently, the Coordinating Board announced that they have retained Student Tracker Premium data services from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) for summer 2020 through summer 2022. This tool will enable Texas institutions and agencies to better analyze and understand the student educational pipeline from K12 schools into and through postsecondary education. Like most institutions of higher education, SFA is increasing the number of online degrees granted; thus, tracking the educational pipeline for these students is important and will allow the institution to understand how students progress through their academic career.

3. With institutions having shifted instruction to online-only in the Spring of 2020 because of the pandemic, what lessons have been learned?

    Faculty and students have both learned that they can be resilient at meeting major, unpredicted challenges to their routines, their learning/teaching modes and practices, and their daily lives. Online and other remote delivery options are essential for institutional effectiveness and survival. This has forced many faculty members into professional development activities that are healthy. Courses must be very well-designed and delivered to be effective, and this has brought many faculty members into a new learning environment.

4. What are the challenges related to technology, quality, accessibility or other considerations? The Committee is seeking the perspectives of college/university administration, faculty and students.

   In rural East Texas, one major obstacle is the lack of broadband infrastructure in the region. The last mile build out of broadband infrastructure is the most challenging. Even when the broadband infrastructure exists, it does not provide the needed bandwidth to support the reliable delivery of information services. We also face the challenge that some of our residents simply do not have a computer to access broadband services due to the socioeconomics of our region.

5. Post-pandemic, will the recent shift to online courses lead to expanded online demand and capacity?

   Yes, this has already happened. SFA has been adding remote delivery courses and programs, and to do that the institution is expanding our capacity to pivot to remote-only options if/when needed.

6. How can the Legislature address gaps in equity in accessing reliable, affordable Internet access?

   One of the most critical actions the legislature can take to address the inequity in affordable Internet access is to fund and support the buildout of broadband infrastructure in Texas and specifically rural communities. The legislature could leverage state projects and initiatives such as highway development projects (i.e. the I-69 corridor) and assist institutions to leverage state fiber infrastructure, at no cost or minimal cost, to build out the needed broadband infrastructure to support Internet access. This effort can also expand to include Texas regional network operators such as the Lonestar Education and Research Network (LEARN) and Southeast Texas Gigapop (SETG). The legislature could also support more competition in the Internet services market as some communities are dependent upon one Internet Service Provider. The legislature could also take a more focused approach in providing broadband infrastructure to Texas communities. At present, state agencies and educational institutions independently determine how to acquire, support, and deliver Internet services. A more focused and concerted state effort to address this will go a long way in helping state agencies and educational institutions to compete in the information marketplace.

7. What sort of differences in quality are we seeing for online nursing programs without a clinical component versus those that do have one or are done in person?

   We are not aware of any Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) programs that do not have a clinical component, since it is a requirement of the Texas Board of Nursing. Some provide didactic instruction online and students arrange for their own clinicals. The Registered Nurse (RN) to BSN program is online, but it has two courses required that are in-person clinical courses.

8. What sort of privacy exists for students utilizing some of the more popular online curriculum packages?

> *We leverage the Department of Information Services (DIR) contract requirements for protecting data and privacy. As more online tools are created and utilized, ensuring privacy will become more challenging as integration among the services and tools will be increasingly important to maximize the technology investment and provide better services to students.*

9. Has recently adopted legislation on Open Educational Resources been able to make an impact on the quality of online education yet?

> *SFA has created multiple pathways for the creation and adoption of open education resources (OER). The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board recently announced the launch of OERTX, the state's digital repository of open education resources for Texas students and institutions of higher education. This initiative was funded by an appropriation from the Texas Legislature. In addition, Governor Abbott and state legislative leadership recently announced that $10 million of federal Governor's Emergency Education Relief (GEER) funding will be committed to improving online learning and to developing OER course materials. SFA plans to utilize these resources in order to reduce costs to students.*

10. Do small and rural community colleges have the financial capability to switch to online, as well as in-person, classes, degrees, etc.?

> *Not applicable*

11. How does the impact of COVID-19 affect the small and rural community college's ability to offer online classes and make other changes to adapt to the pandemic?

> *Not applicable*